

## **FHSU comes together to make beautiful music**

I can't think of many things that provide so much joy, build community, improve memory, and help people "tap into" their feelings than music. Music has even been known to reignite memories in Alzheimer's patients. As a true believer in the power and gift of music, I must say that I have really missed the marching band, the theatre productions, and the many ensemble performances of our student musicians at Fort Hays State University this fall.

Indeed, this year has been hard on our music and theatre department because of COVID-19 concerns.

"The pandemic has changed the way we make music and perform on stage, and has altered how we rehearse with ensembles," shared Dr. Ivalah Allen, associate professor of music and theatre. "All recitals, concerts, and plays have been canceled for the semester. We have recent graduates who were in the process of auditioning around the country when auditions were put on hold. Some musicians have not had incomes since March. Despite all of this, our music and theatre faculty feel grateful to be able to share their craft with our students."

Dr. Allen noted that vocalists have had a lot of fear instilled in them. It isn't safe to sing as they have in "normal" situations of the past. As we learn more about Coronavirus being transmitted mostly through aerosols, this helps musicians better navigate these uncertain times.

For example, we started this semester with all applied voice lessons being taught online. While students typically come in and out of faculty studios many times a day for lessons, now faculty remain alone in their studio space while a student, in another location, sings with his or her phone, iPad, or laptop computer (with masks on).

While it is not ideal, the students are learning that they can still be successful through this new format. They have to rely more on themselves and their ear for intonation and the specific sounds of various languages. Most importantly, Dr. Allen reports that the voice students have made great progress through these different ways of teaching and learning.

To the pleasure of many of us on campus, lessons have also been conducted outdoors. Senior Dannielle Dickerson, a music education major from Riley, feels that the music department is doing its best to rise to the occasion. Danni really enjoys having vocal studio outside as "it has been such a blessing to sing while enjoying the beautiful weather."

Is it working? Dr. Allen said that every one of her FHSU continuing students (sophomores, juniors, seniors, and graduate students) returned to campus this semester. In addition, she has a large number of freshmen, giving her one of the largest applied voice studios she has ever had as a college voice professor. The department as a whole had very few students who didn't return to campus this semester. "This is a true testament that musicians just want to make music any way they can," Dr. Allen said. "Creating music is like breathing air for them – a true necessity."

Senior music education major Gavin Blehm from Abilene believes that the ways in which the department has responded and adapted to meet the needs of its students is rather remarkable.

As a woodwind and brass instrumentalist, Gavin told me that one of the biggest concerns was how those instruments may allow water vapor and air to potentially spread the virus.

Instruments now “wear” bell covers, which prevent any water vapor or air from leaving the instrument uninterrupted or unfiltered. The students wear masks with holes cut in them so that their instruments can contact their faces while limiting the air exhaled. “We are lucky that the department is still allowing us to practice. Like many things these days, there are inconveniences, but the department has adapted and is continuing to provide us with the opportunity to learn and grow as musicians,” Gavin shared.

Strings and orchestra professor Brian Buckstead shared that innovation has become a central part of our musicians’ professional lives. For Brian, that translates to a strings-only orchestra, reduced rehearsal time, social distancing, masks, and a thorough cleaning of music stands and chairs after each rehearsal.

“Even though the format of what I do has been reconfigured and reduced, the essential experience, the communal joy of music making, has remained intact,” Brian said. “Whether that means meeting with students on Zoom for online performances, or in carefully controlled in-person environments, the act of making music supersedes any and all environmental limitations.”

Brian is not only working hard for our students. In order to get community and regional musicians involved, he has created the “Hays Symphony At Home” concert series. During this period of social distancing and canceled concerts, Brian has invited Hays Symphony players to create videos of themselves performing at home. While the musicians cannot perform together as a symphony, his hope is that these individual performances will bring joy and inspiration to our community. This series began in early October and is available on the Hays Symphony Facebook page, as well as [hayssymphony.org](http://hayssymphony.org).

As for theatre, “the show must go on” – just without an audience. “Given the resilient spirit of my colleagues, to have students actively create and produce theatre remains a priority,” shared Director of Theatre Tomme Williams. So, faculty and students will perform Ibsen’s “Hedda Gabbler” in full costume with a set and lights, safely wearing masks, socially distanced, and to an empty room.

“While the wearing of masks and maintaining safe distance from acting partners presents challenges, it also has impacted us in many positive ways,” Tomme said. “Theatre is about human connection – that once-in-a-lifetime moment of exchange. The improvisational spirit of “yes, and” lives as an opportunity to reach out, to create connections despite differences, and to find new ways for our emerging theatre artists all to perform together.”

“More importantly, students will have that chance to socially connect once more. If we can find ways to turn social distancing into social togetherness, then we will have done a great deal.”

I cannot agree more with that sentiment and the spirit with which all of our faculty, staff, and students are embracing the challenges of this academic year: determined to grow, learn, and rise. As Roger Crawford said, “Being challenged in life is inevitable, being defeated is optional.”

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